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# Mayoral Candidates and Downtown

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# Mayoral candidates and downtown

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## Chester Smolski

The next mayor of the city of Providence will have some hard decisions to make on the future of this city. There will be economic opportunities and constraints, social problems, political decisions and a host of questions to be raised and subsequently answered over the next four years which will shape the direction in which Rhode Island's capital city will move — and it is starting to move.

During the next few weeks before the November 7 election the two candidates for the city's top job will be addressing themselves to questions which relate to the entire city, such as taxes, economic development, housing, and others, and they will be working in the neighborhoods talking to residents about issues and steps necessary to continue neighborhood revitalization. But the one "neighborhood" in which the candidates will spend little time talking to residents, because there are so few, is the most significant part of the city — the downtown.

In professional parlance it is called the central business district; the United States Census Bureau calls it Census Tract 8, and they compile considerable data on number of inhabitants, income, race, economic characteristics, and a variety of other items, although the figures are very much out of date because the last census was taken in 1970; and the city planners set it apart as one of the 24 neighborhoods of Providence because of its unique character as the heart of the city.

It is small, taking up only three percent of the entire area of the city, yet its aggregate assessed valuation of \$122 million in 1977, makes it the highest concentration of taxable property in the city. This 12 percent of city total assessed value is situated between the Providence River on the east, the Interstate highways on the south and west, and the Capitol on the north. Because of its uniqueness, its economic character, its visibility and the image it projects of our capital city, it is essential that issues related to it be specifically addressed by the two candidates.

Some of the issues needing dialogue would include the following:

**Housing:** Although the downtown does not contain as many housing units as the neighborhoods, the new construction taking place and that proposed is devoted exclusively to housing for the elderly. Once completed these units will comprise approximately two of every three housing units in this Tract. (The few units being added through rehabilitation of two buildings are not exclusively for the elderly.) The question needs to be raised whether a downtown location is best for the elderly and whether such large concentrations of elderly are best for the downtown.

**Security:** High police visibility serves to promote better security. A decentralized police force has worked in the neighborhoods but the location of a raised aluminum box in what should be the most attractive part of the city raises questions of effectiveness and aesthetics. Are mov-

ing foot patrolmen in a better position to establish merchant contacts, maintain security, direct the flow of traffic when necessary, and serve the public than under the present system?

**Appearance:** The physical attraction of a downtown simply makes it a more inviting and pleasant place in which to spend time and money. What types of measures will be necessary to reduce air pollution, the levels of which do not meet Environmental Protection Agency standards, and to reduce litter and maintain a cleanliness more befitting a capital city? Community development funds have been used effectively to help owners restore building facades but the spectre of vacant upper floors with dirty windows, estimated to be more than one-half of total upper floor space, raises questions of its possible use. Should it be commercial or housing, and can the city do anything to encourage better utilization of these spaces through zoning and building code changes?

**Financial Policy:** One way to stimulate revitalization is to provide incentives to development through tax abatement, as done at the Biltmore Plaza, grants, as currently in use by the Mayor's Office of Community Development, and through other such financial practices. What is the policy on development incentives and does the city intend to make greater use of these? Directly related to this is the matter of establishing an historic district for the downtown. Such designation would help save our old and distinctive buildings, open the door to more federal grants, and help preserve the character of the downtown.

**Employment:** The *raison d'être* for the city centers is their economic function, supplying goods and services for the city and the region, and this means jobs. Office employment looks encouraging, based upon past experience and projected development, but can the city provide a better means to keep such development here rather than having office complexes take up residence in Johnston and Warwick? Retailing activity and employment is down, and without vigorous private leadership and some help from the public sector this situation may worsen.

**Management:** More downtowns are realizing that reinvestment, rehabilitation and new development require some type of coordinating vehicle to fit all of these pieces together. It requires cooperative efforts between public and private sectors to do this effectively. Management specifically directed toward the most valuable cluster of property in the city makes sense, has been used with success in other cities, and certainly ought to be an issue to which candidates should address themselves.

Although not fully comprehensive, the above list is intended to serve as a starting point for what is hoped to be some meaningful dialogue on the future of the downtown, the neighborhood that belongs to the entire city. The hope of the city is dependent on the health of the city center, and that health requires the full attention of the mayoral candidates.

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